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Voice, Devotion, and Social Identity: Women Poets of the Varkari Movement in Medieval Maharashtra

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Abstract

This study explores the process by which women poets of the Varkari alternated between gender and caste identities using abhangas in medieval Maharashtra. The study addresses the connection between devotion, voice, and social identity via qualitative and descriptive-analytical research method that relies on secondary sources and textual analysis of vernacular strains of Bhakti. The study is devoted to Janabai, Muktabai, and Soyarabai whose worship poetry turned ordinary lives and marginalization in the society into the manifestation of spiritual power. Their abhangas exhibit the way women expressed the devotion as they tried to redress the gender and different levels of the caste hierarchy in the stratified society. The study maintains that the devotional poetry of women in the Varkari movement served as spiritual practice and also to re-construct social identity within the medieval Bhakti society.

Keywords: *Varkari Movement, Women Saint-Poets, Bhakti Devotion, Social Identity*

1. Introduction

1.1 The Varkari Movement in Medieval Maharashtra

Varkari movement originated in the thirteenth century Maharashtra under a socio-religious context that consisted of strict caste hierarchy, Brahmanical rituals control and the political formation changes occurring in the state (Novetzke, 132). At this time, the knowledge of the sacred was strongly linked to the learning of Sanskrit and intermediation of the priests, which strengthened the spiritual power of birth. This means that the religious practices were dominated by institutional organizations that restricted the access of the marginalized groups. It was in these confining religious systems that the Varkari movement came about to grow slowly into its own system of devotional tendencies focusing on individual faith and spiritual egalitarianism (Kulkarni, 33).

The Varkari tradition was part of the larger Bhakti movement that was predominant in the Indian subcontinent and which enhanced an emotionally charged and inward taking of devotion. Instead of categorically opposed existing religious organization, the movement presented gradual transformation into individual worship, ethical behaviour and spiritual modesty. This shift shifted the religious activity in the mediaeval Maharashtrian society by focusing more on the subjective experience of the divine than the ritualistic power (Omvedt, 20).

The Varkari tradition is most notably the focus on the worship of Vitthala of Pandharpur, the local form of Krishna which is seen as available, merciful, and closely related to his or her worshipers. The pilgrimage to Pandharpur (Wari), singing of abhangas by saint-poets, and kirtans were some of the most

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common devotional practices that constituted the religious culture of the movement. These activities helped create a participatory devotional atmosphere where people with different social groups could worship together. The Varkari movement turned out to be one of the strongest traditions of devotion in the medieval Maharashtra, through language style and community based worship (Shinde, 110).

1.2 Vitthala-Centered Bhakti: Theology, Vernacularity, and Devotional Expression

The Varkari movement has a theological model that is based on a close and personal connection between the devotee and Vitthala. As opposed to abstraction and metaphysical depiction of divinity, Vitthala is perceived as an available and loving being, who succumbs to heart-felt devotion. The authority of rituals in this tradition is not a basis of spiritual legitimacy, but a humbleness, emotional honesty, and steadfast devotion (Banerjee et al., 12).

The latter theological vision was best embodied in the abhangas, which were lyrical devotional pieces composed in Marathi. These literary phrases acted as not only works of literature, but also as instruments of religious introspection and interpersonal involvement. Abhangas conveyed complicated theology concepts in an understandable vernacular through metaphor, rhythm and repetition enabling devotional discourse to be spread over a broader audience (Bhise et al., 3).

The Varkari tradition of bhakti mutually encouraged the aspects of devotional practices like kirtan, namasmarana (chanting the divine name) and pilgrimage, which reinforced the collective and performative aspects of bhakti. Devotion here did not lie in the personal reflection as is the case in the Christian world, but it is reflected through communal songs, rituals, and publicly through professions of faith. These happened to turn the religious life into a participatory cultural experience which involved the harmonizing of religious piety and the daily social life (Ramanathan, 52-53).

1.3 Devotion as Social Ethic: Community, Equality, and Collective Identity

Devotion in the Varkari tradition served as a social (as well as a personal) ethic to promote community identity. With the movement, there was a movement that encouraged the values of humility, moral discipline, and spiritual equality among believers. Having offered devotion as a factor in spiritual value as opposed to birth or social rank, the Varkari tradition was symbolically subverting both social stratifications (Sambhus, 25-26).

> "*The Varkari tradition represents a devotional community in which collective worship, pilgrimage, and vernacular poetry shaped a shared religious identity." (Kulkarni, 28).*

A rather obvious expression of this group devotionalism is the biannual pilgrimage (Wari) of Pandharpur. In this pilgrimage, the people of different social communities come in large groups singing abhangas and performing religious ceremonies. Pilgrimage experience has a short-term effect of removing the social boundaries and a feeling of spiritual identity among the participants (Banerjee et al., 14).

Nevertheless, this ideal of spiritual equality lived in coexistence with the persistent existence of the caste and gender hierarchy in the medieval society. Although the Varkari movement promoted inclusivity with the help of their devotional practices, they did not completely eliminate the social order. Rather, it developed a dynamic zone whose devotional equality and social hierarchy were in tension giving rise to new spiritual identities that could take place within predetermined social structures (Kulkarni, 17-18).

1.4 Gender and Caste in Medieval Maharashtrian Society

Maharashtrians medieval society was determined by both structures of caste and patriarchy that controlled access to religious power and social transitions. The Brahmanical ideals favored hierarchy based on birth and left women with only household administration and motherhood. In this system, women were somehow allowed to play a religious life, but through male authority figures, usually fathers, husbands, or spiritual teachers (Chakravarti, 726).

This was further restricted through hierarchies of the caste which defined access to sacred space and knowledge of religion. In the case of women who were in the marginalized groups, gender and caste discrimination compounded further to make spiritual practice challenging. These social restrictions played a big role in restraining the open female religious expression in the prevailing religious system (Daukes, 88-90). The ideas of these structural constraints should be familiarized so that the importance of the women devotional poetry in the Varkari tradition can be identified. Their poems were not produced in a social and neutral space but they were produced in context that was characterized by stratified systems of exclusion and hierarchy (Mahadevan, 112-113).

In the Indian subcontinent, female saint-poets were influential in the formation of devotional traditions. Others like Andal, Mirabai and Habba Khatoon brought out spiritual involvement through poetry. Their works show how the Bhakti traditions allowed women to find out space to express their individual devotion and spiritual identity in spite of patriarchal society (Subramaniam, 72).

1.5 Emergence of Women's Devotional Voice within the Varkari Tradition

The emergence of the voicing of women poets in the Varkari in the tradition can be considered as a pivotal moment in resettling spiritual power in medieval Maharashtra. The women saints like *Janabai, Muktabai and Soyarabai* did not engage herself in an already existing tradition of devotion; on the contrary, with the help of the vernacular poetry they expressed their unique theological insights and devotional experiences in the male dominated domain of spiritual practices their abhangas make out of as routine a domestic action as possible an imposture of godhead, and they work spirituality into the beat of daily life. These poets redefined the domestic as a place of divine experience through the use of imagery based on domestic labour, emotional introspection and personal desire. Specifically, in the poems by Soyarabai, the ambivalent relationship between devotion and social exclusion can be traced, and the boundary of the role of women in the Varkari movement was the spirituality that still had to be confirmed despite the restraints of caste and gender hierarchies (Jaybhaye, 22-23).

> "*Women saints in the Bhakti traditions transformed personal devotion into a powerful form of spiritual and social expression."* (Mulchandani, 33-34).

The ordinary was re-marked by embodied and domestic imagery grain grinding, floor sweeping, marriage bargaining, all these poets re-signified the ordinary as an encountering place with the divine. The home, traditionally marked as a site of confinement is transformed into a site of sacred articulation. Devotion is therefore a functioning and process rather than a singleness of piety but a means of discursively negotiating gendered and caste-constrained identities in a stratified society. (Singh, 12).

Whereas bhakti in the compositions of most male saint-poets exists more in the form of philosophical contemplation or any form of social critique, the voices of women in their devotion tend to exist more in the form of lived experience. They are not authoritative based on their institutional identification but rather due to the aspect of devotional authenticity wherein they show how vernacular Bhakti schools of thought allowed various forms of spiritual agency manifestation (Pawale et al., 95–96). This study hence explores how abhangas written by women played out in the Varkari tradition as part of devotional voice within a caste-women society. By putting poetic articulation in place of the context of vernacular theology, household incarnation and social stratification, the study suggests that the d spiritual expression or devotional expression evotional poetry was not only a means of Islamic expression, but also a powerful tool of identity creation in the history of how women lived their lives.

2. Literature Review

Rashmi, Achmare (2025) discussed the Bhakti movement, the reorganizing devotional tradition that restructured the spiritual power and place in India during the medieval period. Feminism academics have examined female devotion in writings by saint-poets like Akka Mahadevi, Mirabai and Andal as a type of

resistance in Patriarchal societies. Even though religious women poets in the Varkari tradition are comparatively less studied despite much effort put on indo-racial Bhakti women saints. The devotional voices of the vernacular that existed in the form of Janabai, Muktabai and Soyarabai, therefore, need to be critically looked at, especially in gender or caste identity.

Pillai, Sharon, (2025) defined bhakti as a type of desire, which focuses on the religious practice and social imagination in the medieval and modern India. The study posits that Bhakti was not only a method of piety which was devoted towards God but also as a construct by which society established certain norms and codes of conduct which were directed and disciplined. In the examination of the linkage between devotion and social control, the study brings out the fact that Bhakti traditions played a role in shaping gender relations in both cultural and religious settings. This approach is helpful in explaining the way the voices of women in devotion were manifested in Bhakti traditions and at the same time negotiated between along lines of existing social and gender conventions.

Shailesh Ambadas Mahamuni, (2024) explored the cultural and philosophical meaning of pilgrimage in Maharashtra, the Varkari tradition. The Varkari Sampradaya who were devoted to Vitthal (Vithoba) has also been instrumental in influencing the spiritual and cultural fabric of the area. It is a tradition of pilgrimage to Pandharpur especially on Ashadhi and Kartiki Ekadashi. According to Mahamuni, the pilgrimage is a unifying practice that can cross over caste and social barriers to establish a feeling of shared identity amongst a believer. The spiritual zeal, and the social life of the Varkari, is still more clearly recognized by the writings of Dilip Chitre, particularly in his translations of the abhangas of Tukaram in Says Tuka. This point of view assists in getting a clear picture of the devotional culture where women saints revealed their spirituality by means of abhangas.

Abhinav Yadav, (2024) studied the bhakti movement in medieval Maharashtra as a syncretic devotional culture of form that had an influence on socio-political and cultural paradigm of the region. The study follows the development of the Varkari movement and its contribution to the gender, linguistic and social mobility issues. The study, based on a socio-historical approach, shows the way Bhakti worked within the existing cultural hierarchies and, at the same time, developed new forms of devotional practice. Study also focuses on the nature of women in the Maharashtrian tradition of devotional poetry, and how their poetry illuminates the experience of women living in the socio-cultural environment of the land. The study also contends that Bhakti provided a platform through which women were able to express themselves even though they continued to live in the patriarchal social systems.

Arunav Das, & Rajeshwar Mittapalli (2023) investigated the role of Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai in Bhakti literature using the comparison of their devotional poetry. Through discussions of specific works the study has examined the way Mahadevi and Mirabai have in devotion to Shiva and Krishna articulated female spiritual agency in a different but similar manner. The study placed both poets in the context of socio-cultural limitation of medieval patriarchy and stated that their devotional performance served as a form of resistance towards the caste, class, and gender hierarchies. By means of incisive lyrics and spiritual imagery, those poet-saints redefined the authority of devotion and the ranges of self-expression of women, in a confining social order. The study highlighted the way Bhakti created a discursive rift through which women were able to bargain identity and over rule morality. This comparative system helped to generalize feminist interpretations of devotional practices in India of medieval times.

Shubhra Sinha (2022) investigated that the study of Women history was not limited to the positions they played in the family and society but also included structural issues that were forced on them under various historical settings. In medieval Maharashtra, the Varkari panth was a leading Bhakti movement that incorporated both the Shaiva and Vaishnava movements and was dedicated to Vitthal of Pandharpur. Its movement was commonly known to remain comparatively inclusive in its devotional culture to a relatively

limited some extent that enabled multiple women saint-poetesses to participate in it. Venerated as women of valor, these personalities gave spiritual expression to their experiences using Marathi abhangas marked with the spiritual ableness and rhythmic perfection. Janabai had an important position among them. This study re-created her life, thoughts and work based on the examination of her abhangas and hagiography readings, and placed her into the context of the socio-religious life of the Varkari movement of western India.

Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach, (2019) studied the analysis of how women authorship attribution was used in the construction and creation of the Varkari bhakti tradition. It tried to explore the role of the prominent presence of female poet-sants (santakaviyatris) in establishing the understanding of self-representation of the sampradaya. The study has used textual analysis of the sacred biographies (caritra) and texts credited to women saints, and the study has examined the tension in the tradition of varkarli between renunciation (sannyas) and the householder (grihastha) life. The results indicated that the existence of the compositions attributed to women in the Varkariki corpus justified and demonstrated the validity of this and that of the householder devotional path. In the analysis, the study identified a large input of the sampraday discursive constitution by female devotional voices.

2.1 Research Gaps

Women saint-poets like Akka Mahadevi, Mirabai, and Andal, have been studied in the previous scholarship on the Bhakti movement and have been recognized as devotional poetry as a type of spiritual agency in the patriarchal societies (Achmare, 2025; Das and Mittapalli, 2023). Another area that scholars have addressed Bhakti as a social and cultural practice that influences the gender relation and religions identities (Pillai, 2025). Study on Varkari tradition speaks of pilgrimage, devotional tradition, and female inclusion in the movement (Mahamuni, 2024; Yadav, 2024; Sinha, 2022; Kirloskar-Steinbach, 2019). Nevertheless, little has been done regarding the articulation of gender and caste identities in the devotional poetry of Janabai, Muktabai and Soyarabai using abhangas.

3. Research Methodology

This study will take a qualitative, descriptive-analytical level of study to find out how voice, devotion and social identity is reflected in the poetry of women in the Varkari movement in medieval Maharashtra. The study is based in Maharashtra, where the Varkari tradition has been based on the worships at Vitthala that is located in the city of Pandharpur. The work is based on secondary sources in the form of academic books, journal articles, theses and translations of abhangas by women saint-poet ancestrys like *Janabai, Muktabai and Soyarabai*. The study uses text and contextual analysis to examine the way devotional poetry brought out the gendered and caste-based identities in the medieval Maharashtrian society.

4. Results

Women saintly devotional poetry of the Varkari tradition has been given a unique spiritual voice by the form of abhangas. These are lyrical works that have a theological rumination and serve as a potent tool of expressing devotional experience. Abandoning the Sanskritic religious language of a scholastic tradition, abhangas are anchored on emotional closeness and experience with the deity Vitthala. The relational metaphors, first-person narration, and emotional immediacy help women saint-poets to turn devotion into an experiential conversation among the devotee and the divine. In this regard, abhang turns out to be a poetic genre as well as a spiritual mode where devotional consciousness is socialized (Achmare, 4).

Such devotional articulation is grounded with a greater meaning within the socio-cultural context of the medieval Maharashtra, where the agency of women was limited structurally. Incorporating devotion into the patterns of daily existence, women poets turned everyday domestic place into the spiritual one. The poems of Janabai, Muktabai and Soyarabai have shown that the domestic, emotional, and personal thoughts and

actions are turned into a metaphor of the devotional experience. By using such phrases the domestic space, which is traditionally perceived as an area of confinement, becomes a place of divine encounter and spiritual expression (Bhattacharya, 236). Abhangas by Janabai often portray adoration by the labour of the home. In one verse she writes:

> "*I grind the grain and sing Vitthala's name,*
> *The Lord himself helps me in my work*."

Devotional expression, in particular, in the poetry of Soyarabai, is connected to both spiritual desire and social disfavoritism. Her compliments are expressed in such a way that she means deep devotion to Vitthala and at the same time, opens up the limiting truths of caste and gender. By using emotionally loaded devotional words, Soyarabai reveals how Bhakti helped women to exercise spiritual agency and bargain on their identity in a hierarchical social order (Kulkarni, 21). Soyarabai makes this spiritual statement in the midst of social rejection in one of her abhangas:

> "*Though the world calls my birth impure,*
> *My heart rests at the feet of Vitthala*."

In this manner, the abhang is made a negotiable spiritual power. This is despite the fact that despite the focus in the Varkari tradition on spiritual egalitarianism it did not eradicate current social hierarchies completely. Tension between spirituality inclusion and social restriction is hence the working area of women devotional voices. Integrating personal experience into poetic form and those forms of collective piety and devotion, these women poets inscribed their spiritual subjectivity into the shared memory of the Varkari sampradaya and put the expression of religious devotion into subtle yet persistent assertion of spiritual agency (Bhattacharya, 115-116).

Devotion of the Varkari movement in this model served as a social action as well as a spiritual practice with which identity was negotiated. The caste division and patriarchal traditions arranged the medieval Maharashtrian society and ruled the access to religious power and social upward mobility. In these respects, Bhakti transformed the foundation of spiritual authority up to birth-based order to devotional sincerity. This ethos of Varkari therefore drew a pious framework whereby people were able to redefine social identity by drawing into spiritual dedication as opposed to ritual privilege (Youngblood, 291).

As a way of recognition and belonging, such devotional practice was an avenue of recognition and community membership to women and marginalized caste communities. Viithala In an abhangas, the poet expressed a close association with Vitthala that circumvented ritual exclusion and focused on an experiential devotion. Domesticated labour, sexual desire, and physical susceptibility, which had historically been linked to the lower social ranks of society, became the signs of religious submission and connection with the divine. In that sense, devotion became a theological theory in which gendered and caste identities could be redefined in the context of the existence of the divine (Achmare, 7-8).

However, this bargaining was done within long-term social units. The Varkari movement acted in favor of spiritual equality, although it did not destroy caste and gender hierarchy completely. Devotion was thus a dynamic discourse of dialogic space which was both empowering and disabling. Women expressions of devotion in this context can demonstrate how Bhakti emerged as a dynamic process in which social identities were debated, transformed, and redefined in the medieval Maharashtrian society (Abhinav, 305).These results confirm the previous literature showing that the Varkari movement was an example of a devotional tradition that promoted the mass joining of spiritual practices, but nonetheless exists within established social structures (Mahamuni, 2024; Yadav, 2024). Like wider traditions of Bhakti poetry where women poets like Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi had codified spiritual agency through devotional poetry (Das and Mittapalli, 2023; Achmare, 2025), the abhangas of Janabai, Muktabai, and Soyarabai demonstrate how the devotional expression mediated gender, spirituality, and social identity to the medieval Maharashtrian society.

5. Conclusion

The study explored the ways in which women poets of the Varkari school were able to articulate the devotional voice in abhangas to negotiate the position of a gendered and caste-based identity in the lives of medieval Maharashtra. The theme of Vitthala-oriented Bhakti is reflected in the poetry of Janabai, Muktabai and Soyarabai which reveals how the daily experiences were changed into the expressions of strong spiritual devotion. Their abhangas portray that devotion was not only a religious practice but also a form of expression/identity where those voices who were at the margins negotiated social beats. Introducing spirituality into everyday life, these poets widened the boundaries of devotional expression and helped to create a more comprehensive spiritual debate in the Varkari movement.

6. Limitations, Implications and Future Research Directions

The study is based on secondary literature and translated abhangas, which might not allow reaching the linguistic subtleties of original texts of Marathi. However, it also points to devotional poems as one of the means of spiritual expression and negotiation of identity. Further studies can address original Marathi texts and likened Bhakti traditions.

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